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Social Problems, 2017, 0, 1–25
doi: 10.1093/socpro/spx040
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Gun Culture in Action

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the symbolic meaning of guns in the United States may be one the best ways to approach theoretical questions concerning the effect of "culture in action" because it focuses on a single object—the gun—which brims with symbolic power far beyond its physical utility. Using data from the Baylor Religion Surveys (Wave 4), we investigate the extent to which guns empower gun owners morally and emotionally. We also investigate the diversity of gun owners. We find a wide range of gun empowerment among gun owners, and that this relationship is related to gender, race, religiosity, political views, gun use, and economic distress. Our findings also indicate that Americans' attachment to guns is not explained entirely by regional, religious, or political cultures. Instead, we demonstrate that white men in economic distress find comfort in guns as a means to reestablish a sense of individual power and moral certitude. Gun empowerment, in turn, affects opinions about gun action and policy.

KEYWORDS: gun control; gun culture; culture in action; gun empowerment; race and guns.

In 1970, historian Richard Hofstadter explained America's exceptionally high rates of gun ownership and violence as the result of a deep-seated "gun culture." While we often reference this uniquely American phenomenon, the explanatory value of Hofstadter's (1970) assessment is unclear. To call distinctive social and political outcomes the result of "culture" leaves much to be desired.

It also raises a host of difficult questions concerning what constitutes culture, what produces culture, and how do we demonstrate the effects of culture in action. Exploring the meaning of guns in the United States may be one the best ways to approach these issues because it focuses on a single object—the gun—which brims with symbolic power far beyond its physical utility. Ann Swidler (1986) argues that "symbolic forms are the means through which 'social processes of shared modes of behavior and outlook with a community' take place." (p. 273). As such, the moral and emotional meaning of firearms provides a case study in how symbolic elements of cultural meaning are socially constructed and influence strategies of action.

"Our job as cultural analysts is to discern what the shapes and consistencies of local meanings actually are, and to determine how, why, and to what extent they hang together." (Sewell 2005:174). To that end, we focus on the perceived meaning of guns among gun owners in order to examine variation in gun symbolism along with the social sources of the gun's semiotic power. Using original data

The authors would like to thank Lindsay Wilkinson, Christopher Pieper, and three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. This article was presented at the 2014 annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Indianapolis, Indiana. Direct correspondence to: F. Carson Mencken, Department of Sociology, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97326, Waco, TX 76798-7326. E-mail: Carson_Mencken@Baylor.edu.

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from the Baylor Religion Survey (Wave 4)[1], we develop a "gun empowerment" scale to measure a gun owner's level of moral and emotional attachment to guns. In turn, we look at the extent to which gun empowerment relates to how individuals understand the source of gun violence, the virtue of gun policy, as well as the legitimacy of violence against the government.

We find that American gun owners vary greatly in their sense of empowerment from guns; most dramatically, white respondents who have undergone or fear economic distress tend to derive self-esteem and moral rectitude from their weapons. For this distinct group of gun owners, gun empowerment delivers a sense of meaning to life that neither economic status nor religious devotion currently provide. These owners' attachment to guns draws directly from popular narratives concerning American masculinity, freedom, heroism, power, and independence. In turn, owners who feel more emotionally and morally empowered by their guns are more likely to think that guns can solve social problems and make communities safer, and that citizens are sometimes justified in taking violent action against the government.

This stark variation *within* the population of gun owners indicates that the symbolic importance of guns is not a post hoc justification, an individual's preference, or need to own a firearm. Rather, we see a profoundly sociological process at work because only certain gun owners within specific social groups and under particular economic circumstances find guns morally and emotionally restorative. It is these social contexts that trigger a need for moral meaning and an attraction to frontier gun mythology; they also ultimately determine an American's perception of guns and their importance to self and society.

Hofstadter was correct in arguing that "culture" is one of the sources of America's heightened gun violence and relaxed gun policy, but it is more precise to state that the symbol of the gun has become a source of identity and moral meaning to specific populations within the United States. For this reason, gun control signifies something much more than a procedural policy to these owners; it has come to represent an attack on their masculinity, independence, and moral identity. This is how gun culture influences the beliefs and behavior of many Americans and provides a clear case study of "culture in action."

GUNS

The United States is distinctive among Western post-industrialized countries because of its high percent of gun owners, high levels of gun violence, and less restrictive gun laws (Goss 2006:4-5; Mauser and Margolis 1992). These statistics are used as evidence of a distinctly American gun "culture." However, a paradox emerges when looking at policy preferences as they relate to gun laws; namely, public support for stricter gun control is on the rise, yet gun laws remain comparatively lax (Goss 2006; Haider-Markel and Joslyn 2001; Kleck 1996; Smith 1980; Utter and True 2000). The reason for this paradox is often attributed to the influence of gun lobbies, most notably the National Rifle Association, in American politics (Melzer 2009). In addition, gun makers and special interest groups promote narratives and identities that glorify American gun owners and celebrate our "gun culture" in the process. As Robert Spitzer (2004) indicates, it is this "long-term sentimental attachment" to guns that distinguishes American history from other countries' and accounts for the United States' favorable gun legislation (p. 8).

Christopher Ellison (1991a) indicates two general methodological approaches in the literature used to understand contemporary American gun culture(s). The first approach links regional measures of violence and inequality to a collective demand for firearms, and the second approach analyzes individual-level data to predict gun ownership and policy preferences. Both quantitative approaches have yielded a better understanding of which communities experience the greatest gun violence and which Americans are most likely to own and use firearms. To these we can add a third approach—qualitative or ethnographic studies of gun owners (see Carlson 2015a, 2015b; Carter 1998; Goss

1 See Bader, Mencken, and Froese 2007 for methodological information on BRS waves.

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2006; Kohn 2004; Melzer 2009; Stroud 2012, 2015; Taylor 2009). These in-depth studies give greater insight into the ritual and ideological lives of gun owners.

The first approach attempts to define America's gun culture geographically. The most consistent and discussed finding is the fact that gun ownership is especially prevalent in the South and also evident in the West. This has led researchers to investigate a uniquely "Southern" culture, sometimes labeled an "honor culture" or a "culture of violence" (Brennan, Lizotte, and McDowall 1993; Cash 1941; Cohen 1996; Cohen and Nisbett 1994; Cohen et al. 1996; Dixon and Lizotte 1987; Gastil 1971; Hackney 1969; Hayes and Lee 2005; O'Connor and Lizotte 1978; Parker 1989; Smith and Parker 1980). In contrast, gun ownership in the West is sometimes referred to as an aspect of "frontier culture" (Limerick 2006; Melzer 2009). Critics of these descriptors point to the fact that, in most cases, these regionally defined cultures are based empirically on little more than higher gun ownership rates (Felson and Pare 2010a, 2010b). As such, these are not direct measures of cultural systems of meaning or values.

With regards to individual-level ownership a few consistent and reliable trends beyond regional variation emerge. Put plainly, gun owners tend to be white, middle-class, middle-aged, and politically conservative men (Adams 1996; Brennan, Lizotte, and McDowall 1993; Celinska 2007; Cook and Ludwig 1997; Dixon and Lizotte 1987; Felson and Pare 2010a, 2010b; Kleck 1997; Legault 2008; Little and Vogel 1992; Lizotte and Bordua 1980; Smith 2000; Wright and Marston 1975). While the demographic characteristics of gun ownership are relatively stable, these variables alone don't suggest a monolithic "culture" of individuals who share a common understanding of guns and their importance (Cooke and Puddifoot 2000; Kates 1994).

To better understand variation within the population of American gun owners, researchers often divide owners by how they use firearms. Spitzer (2004:9) separates owners into those with a "hunting/sporting ethos" and those with a "militia/frontier ethos" (also see Celinska 2007). The recreational subculture is further separated into intersecting groups; hunters, recreational shooters, collectors, and those who have firearms for work (policemen, guards, and the military) (Lizotte and Bordua 1980).

Americans who own guns for primarily defensive purposes are more likely to be grouped into categories that postulate a shared ideological or regional norm. The "Southern culture of honor" or "violence" is consequently used to explain why only certain American's feel the need to defend themselves with guns (Brennan et al. 1993; Cohen et al. 1996; Dixon and Lizotte 1987; McCall, Land, and Cohen 1992; Nisbett 1993; Nisbett and Cohen 1996). Katarzyna Celinska (2007) argues that similarities between recreational and defensive ownership can be traced to one ideological source—American individualism. Others have shown gun ownership is tied to a need for collective security (Kleck and Gertz 1995), a fear of crime (DeFronzo 1979), and waning confidence in the government (Jiobu and Curry 2001).

Overall, the quantitative literature on gun culture tends to be in search of the key defining characteristic of the American gun owner. "Southern," "violent," "honor based," "frontier masculinity," "fear," and "individualistic" are labels intended to evoke the core cultural element uniting gun owners. All of these monikers are accurate in the sense that many gun owners in the United States appear to share an emotional or group-identity attachment to guns that extends beyond their daily utility. Yet, as Jimmy Taylor (2009) notes, "relatively little has been published about the symbolic nature of guns and the ritualistic aspect of gun ownership in academic literature" (p. 3).

In an attempt to simplify yet complement various explorations of America's gun culture, we asked gun owners directly how they felt about guns. A set of questions on the Baylor Religion Survey (Wave 4) target two important semiotic aspects of ownership. The first addresses the extent to which guns improve a person's sense of self and feelings of control; respondents indicate the extent to which they agree that guns make them feel "safe," "responsible," "confident," and "in control of my fate." Next, respondents indicate the ways in which guns improved their moral reputation, answering whether guns made them feel "more valuable to my family," "more valuable to my community," "respected," and "patriotic." While these eight items have two conceptual categories (self-control and moral standing)

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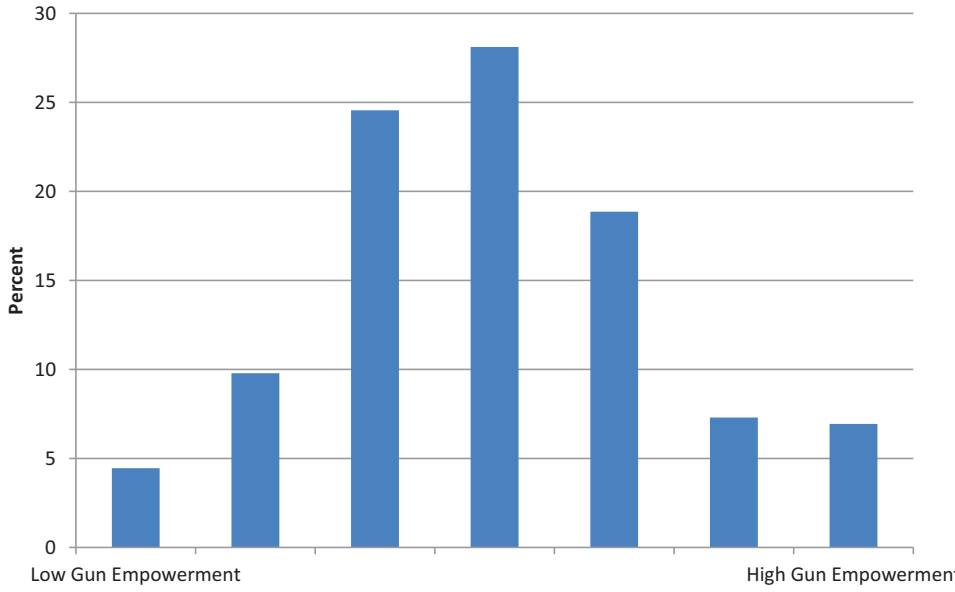

Figure 1. Histogram of Gun Empowerment Index (Gun Owners BRS IV)

they strongly factor together (Cronbach Alpha = .93). Consequently, we created a "gun empowerment scale," that measures the symbolic importance of firearms to owners (see Figure 1).

While ethnographic and qualitative studies have plumbed the depths of gun owners' daily lives and thoughts in ways we cannot replicate, our quantitative measure of gun empowerment provides a necessary compliment to these studies by providing a means to summarize variation within the population of American gun owners and test the sources and outcomes of this variation. In fact, Stephen Vaisey (2009) argues that survey questions with forced response categories can accurately capture deeply embedded moral feelings and perspectives in ways that lengthy interviews or observations cannot. This is based on the idea that individuals use a "practical consciousness," which leads them to choose a survey response that "feels right" even if they are unable to articulate the reasons for their answers (Vaisey 2009:1689). In this way, our measure of gun empowerment elicits an owner's immediate feelings about guns with no need to justify or elaborate on his reaction.

Our two-pronged analysis investigates (1) the social sources of these feelings (symbolic meaning as the dependent variable) and (2) the political ramifications of these feelings (symbolic meaning as the independent variable). We treat cultural meaning, as measured by a feeling toward a specific symbol or as a "dialectic of system and practice," to quote William Sewell (2005:169). Sewell (2005) further states that, "If a given symbol system is taken by its users to be unambiguous and highly constraining, this fact cannot be accounted for by the system's semiotic qualities alone, but must result from the way semiotic structures are interlocked in practice with other structures—economic, political, social, spatial, etc" (p. 167). To that end, we empirically demonstrate how the symbol of the gun ultimately relies on social contexts for meaning and its motivational effects on political opinions and practices.

CULTURE

Debates about the importance of culture often devolve into discussions about the meaning of the word itself (see Sewell 2005 and Smith 2003 for excellent overviews). Following Swidler (1986) we hold that "culture consists of . . . symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories, and rituals of daily

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life" (p. 273). The totality of culture, as defined this way, is impossible to fully measure. Yet we can still focus on particularly overt aspects of culture, such as popular and distinctly defined symbols and narratives, to gain insight into the influence of specific slices of an individual's cultural universe.

In particular, we are interested in how and when individuals derive meaning and self-identity from cultural symbols. The symbol of the gun is already consciously attached to the widely understood concept of an "American gun culture," which contains both positive and negative connotations. The current NRA president Wayne LaPierre is proud of the cultural aspect of gun ownership and speaks directly to it; he asks, "What is the 'gun culture'? . . . To millions of Americans, especially those who own firearms, the term refers to America's traditional bedrock values of self-reliance, self-defense, and self-determination." (Melzer 2009:29). The NRA openly advances the idea that gun ownership reflects a set of clearly defined identities and values, and declares that guns not only empower you physically, but emotionally and morally. In fact, owning a gun becomes essential to being a "good" and patriotic American (see also Carlson 2015a, 2015b).

Scott Melzer (2009) interviewed gun owners and found that "this myth . . . has become widely accepted and valued beyond this group (the NRA)" (p. 33). He quotes a NRA member, who sums up this cultural perspective simply:

> If the [NRA] were to portray itself as a symbolic person . . . He is self-reliant, morally strong, and competent. He is also peaceful by preference, but ready to defend himself from attack. He believes in personal rather than collective responsibility. He is not against government but sees its role as subordinate and supplementary to individual personal efforts. He opposes the arbitrary abuse of government but is openly patriotic" (p. 42).

John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (2002) argue that an American "monomyth" pervades our popular culture. The monomyth has three components: (1) a community threatened by evil; (2) institutions that cannot handle the threat; and (3) a selfless hero that saves the day then fades into obscurity. The monomyth is a mainstay in American entertainment, having emerged in popular novels after the Civil War; authors such as Owen Wister (*The Virginian* [1902]) and Zane Grey (*Riders of the Purple Sage* [1912]) routinely romanticized the role of the strong masculine hero in defeating evil. This theme became a mainstay of Hollywood films, depicted most clearly in classic John Wayne films such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and *The Shootist* (1976), and carried through to more modern films starring action heroes such as Sylvester Stallone in the Rambo series. In 2014, *The American Sniper*, an action portrayal of Navy S.E.A.L. Chris Kyle and his sniper exploits in Iraq, was the highest grossing film in the United States (U.S. $350 million). To millions of Americans, Kyle is a real-life exemplar of how patriotic heroes use the tools of violence to defeat evil and to protect our country. Robert Dean (2001) argues the action heroes in both popular fiction and real life help to maintain a culture of male dominance and preexisting status structures (see also O'Neill 2007).

Within popular depictions of American gun owners, several components are revealing. Namely, the fact that the mythical gun owner/hero is usually white and male. These characteristics are iterated in movies, television, video games, and popular fiction, and appeal directly to those who share these demographic traits (Kohn 2004; Taylor 2009). Males, according to Angela Stroud (2015), face a constant need to prove their masculinity. Wayne Baker (2005) notes that guns have also become "symbolic of the male role as family protector. They are an instrument of moral strength and a symbol of the power of the Strict Father." (p. 199). Kevin Lewis O'Neill (2007) argues that "The Armed Citizen" column in the NRA's publication glorifies heroic masculinity, men using their guns to confront lethal danger to protect their families. Previous literature recognizes the potential for gender differences in gun attachment, but not necessarily race (Carlson 2015b). However, Joshua Horwitz and Casey Anderson (2009) report that gun shows are a popular gathering point for insurrectionists, and that the clientele is mostly white and these

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events are often well-stocked with racist literature and paraphernalia. Gun symbolism as depicted in popular culture routinely *targets and cultivates* a white male audience (Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007). This leads to our first hypothesis:

> *H1: Gun owners who are white and male will be* ***more*** *likely to find moral and emotional empowerment in the symbol of the gun.*

But beyond the culturally ubiquitous image of the heroic white man with a gun, we want to better understand why certain white male gun owners place higher emotional and moral value on guns. What is the core motive that leads some to view firearms as source of power and identity? Christian Smith (2003) argues that one of the "fundamental motivations for human action" is "to enact and sustain the moral order" (p. 11). Moral order is universally desired because it provides individuals with a system of meaning that explains the role and goodness of self (Froese 2016). As Jonathan Turner and Jan E. Stets (2005) explain, "When the self is not confirmed in a situation, individuals often employ defensive strategies and invoke defense mechanisms that distort their experience and expression of emotion" (p. 24).

Using Swidler's cultural toolkit metaphor, guns are an easily accessed symbolic "tool" to morally and emotionally cope with distress (Carlson 2015b). As such, guns maintain a desired "moral order" as well as a moral identity, one which gun owners quite literally hold onto as a physical representation of their power and autonomy. Swidler (1986:278) hypothesizes that symbolic elements of culture can become especially powerful and influential in "unsettled lives" or "periods of social transformation." This makes sense because economic strain and disruptive life events have been shown to "erode positive concepts of self, such as self-esteem and mastery" (Pearlin et al. 1981). Life strains tend to be disproportionately experienced by lower status members of society; for this reason, racial minorities are more likely to have prolonged stress exposure with negative physical and mental health outcomes (Turner and Avison 2003). While certain marginalized groups experience more psychological distress, the effect of these stressors varies with group identity (Thoits 1991). For instance, whites who experience financial strain tend to have higher levels of stress and health problems than nonwhites with similar stress exposure (Kahn and Pearlin 2006; Ryff, Keyes, and Hughes 2003). Joan Kahn and Leonard Pearlin (2006) theorize that "it may be that equivalent levels of financial strain have different meanings for African Americans and white, with the former more likely to perceive and experience economic deprivation as a normative state of being" (p. 26).

In addition to being the target gun audience, white men may feel the sting of the recent economic recession more acutely than other groups in the United States because they have come to expect boundless economic opportunity. Michael Kimmel (2013) argues white men have become especially angry and confused by an economy that no longer seems to expressly favor them; he shows that it is downwardly mobile white men who "form the backbone of the Tea Party, of the listeners of outrage radio, of the neo-Nazis and white supremacists" (p. 23). These white men are searching for positive identities in a society that they perceive to be turning against them. Given the ubiquitous myth of the independent and heroic gunman, firearms seem a logical symbol to embrace (McGrath 1984). Findings from sixty in-depth interviews of gun owners in Michigan support the hypothesized link between economic distress and gun attachment; in particular, Jennifer Carlson (2015b) argued that white men routinely use guns "to negotiate their own position within a context of socioeconomic decline by emphasizing their role as protector" (p. 386).

Carlson's (2015a, 2015b) research focuses on how the gun fits into the "protector" masculinity model, and how this model has emerged because of an economic restructuring that has eliminated or at least threatens to eliminate, the 'breadwinner' masculinity model. Global economic changes over the last 30 years have stressed workers' share of earnings, leading to greater macro-level income inequality and greater economic strain on households (see Etzioni 2011; Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013; Sherman 2013; Treas 2010). The economic distress of the Great Recession has negatively affected male workers more severely than in any economic downturn since 1981. According to the

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Displaced Worker Survey, during the Great Recession 16 percent of males lost a job, and the mean spell of unemployment was 35 weeks. Less than half of the males who lost a job during the Great Recession were working full time by January 2010. For those who lost jobs, the breadwinner masculinity model no longer works; for those who did not lose jobs, the recession still created anxiety,[2] concern, or what Carlson (2015b:392) labels "precarity," a sense of foreboding or impending economic calamity.

According to hegemonic masculinity models, the loss of breadwinner masculinity led to a rise in protector masculinity (Carlson 2015a, 2015b). The economic turmoil, coupled with the nation's fear of terror attacks, active shooters, Amber Alerts, and other moral panics generated by the media, has led to the emergence of a narrative that our world is not as safe as it used to be (Griffin and Miller 2008; Woods 2012). Stroud (2012:218) refers to a "New War ethos" in which the ability to use protective violence is socially necessary. Males can reclaim their position at the top of the masculinity hierarchy through engaging in fantasies about being an NRA "good guy" who uses his gun to protect his family and community from the "bad guys." The gun is the key prop used again and again in the protector narrative. This leads to our second hypothesis:

H2: Gun owners who experience economic distress will be ***more*** *likely to find moral and emotional empowerment in the symbol of the gun.*

Once embraced as a source of identity and power the gun can become an object of worship which makes its own demands, no longer simply a tool used for emotional solace but rather a source of sacred meaning. Randall Collins (2004) notes that "many individuals who are intensely involved with guns spend much of their leisure time reloading ammunition . . . the long hours spent on reloading ammunition suggests that this is a ritualistic affirmation of the membership, something like a member in a religious cult engaging in private prayer, in actual physical contact with the sacred objects, like fingering the beads of rosary" (p. 101). Swidler (1986:279) hypothesizes that "ritual acquires such significance in unsettled lives because ritual changes reorganize taken-for-granted habits and modes of experience. People developing new strategies of action depend on cultural modes to learn new styles of self, relationship, cooperation, authority, and so forth" (p. 279). As such, we ponder whether gun empowerment can become a substitute for religious devotion, or whether religion can mute the strength of an owner's attachment to guns.

Researchers often use a single religion control when analyzing gun ownership and have consistently found that Protestants are more likely to own guns but tend not to investigate the relation further (Dixon and Lizotte 1987; Ellison 1991a, 1991b; Jiobu and Curry 2001; Kleck and Kovandzic 2009). David Yamane (2017) recently found that while Protestant identification and theological conservatism are positively related to gun ownership, religious involvement has a negative effect. This suggests that even though guns are ubiquitous in American Protestant communities, the most devout Protestants may have less time or need for them. We hypothesize that religious symbols and rituals may supplant the emotional and moral need for guns, even if their practical use is still desired. Consequently:

H3: Gun owners who are religiously devout will be ***less*** *likely to find moral and emotional empowerment in the symbol of the gun.*

Looking at the population of gun owners, we seek to find who embraces the emotional and moral symbolism of guns, why they embrace them, and what the social and policy ramifications of these attachments are. In addressing these issues, we propose a simple model of culture in action. First, cultural tools need to be available in order to be utilized. We note the wide availability of guns both physically and symbolically as a "tool" to mitigate self-doubt, reclaim masculinity, and enhance self-

2 Carlson (2015b:392-93) discusses a state of "precarity" that economic distress can cause for those who do not actually experience direct recession effects, but who nonetheless are exposed to enough bad news that a state of heightened anxiety is created.

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esteem and control (H1). Next, the power of a symbol will be enhanced to the degree that individual lives are "unsettled" or in need of stress reduction and emotional support; this may well be the case for people in economic despair (H2) or individuals who do not obtain existential meaning from religion (H3).

Finally, we expect that symbols with high moral and emotional significance will more strongly influence and shape strategies of action. Building on Durkheim's concerns about the cult of individualism, Celinska (2007) contends that gun ownership and opposition to gun laws are a function of whether an actor is inclined toward the values of individualism or collectivism. According to Emile Durkheim ([1897] 1951), egoism leads to low levels of cooperation and social cohesion. This makes institutional arrangements less effective, which in turn, creates a culture in which individuals stress self-reliance and eschew collective (i.e., government) solutions to social problems (see also Lipset 1990; Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). This begins to explain how gun empowerment fosters anti-government sentiments and militia.

Joshua Horwitz and Casey Anderson (2009) argue that the "insurrectionist" gun movement has been growing since the 1970s and is a decidedly anti-democratic, anti-community, and anti-consensus (see also Blee and Creasap 2010). For instance, a community initiative to restrict guns in public parks and playgrounds is challenged as tyrannical government overreach. Or insurrectionists will fight a shop owners' rights to operate a gun-free business if it is located in a geography where concealed and/or open carry is allowed. Individual gun rights reign supreme because the insurrectionist movement is founded on the narrative that the gun is the *only* tool, cultural or physical, that can defend liberty and keep an unchecked government from repressing its citizens. The movement is also anti-elitist (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Blee and Creasap 2010; Horwitz and Anderson 2009). According to the insurrectionist narrative and NRA literature, elites who run the government are "statists" who disdain "ordinary people" and want to make them slaves of the state. From this perspective, the average citizen's support for individual gun rights is the only thing that stands between a life of freedom and one of enslavement by a tyrannical government.

This leads to our final hypothesis, which links gun empowerment to social and political strategies of action. Specifically,

> *H4: Gun owners who find moral and emotional empowerment in the symbol of the gun are* ***more*** *likely to: (1) reject gun control policies; (2) believe that gun ownership can solve social problems; and (3) believe that violence against the U.S. government is sometimes justifiable.*

DATA

Our data come from Wave 4 of the Baylor Religion Survey (BRS IV). The survey was an address-based sample of households in the 48 contiguous states, conducted in January 2014 by the Gallup Organization. The final sample was 1,572 respondents. In order to assess how well the BRS IV compares to the general population, we compare the BRS IV to the 2014 General Social Survey (Smith et al. 2014) on comparable measures. Demographically, the two surveys are very similar. The mean ages in the GSS 2014 and BRS IV are 46 and 45, respectively; females comprise 53 percent of the BRS IV and 53.8 percent of the GSS 2014, respectively; 18 percent of the GSS 2014 hold a BA degree, compared to 18.1 percent of the BRS IV; 45.7 percent of the respondents in the GSS 2014 are currently married, 26.6 percent are single never married, compared to 47.1 percent currently married and 24.5 percent single never married in the BRS IV. Given that the BRS IV is a survey on religious values and attitudes, we are concerned that the BRS data does not over-represent certain religious groups (i.e., Evangelical Christians). We provide in Table 1 and quick comparison of church attendance and political views from both surveys. The BRS and GSS compare favorably among those who rarely if ever attend religious services. The BRS has a slightly higher percent of respondents who

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Table 1. Comparison of Baylor Religion Survey 2014 and General Social Survey 2014

Attendance	*BRS IV (%)*	*GSS 2014 (%)*	*Political Views*	*BRS IV(%)*	*GSS 2014 (%)*
Never	24.3	26.5	Extremely conservative	5.1	4.4
Less than once a year	7.9	7.2	Conservative	21.6	14.6
Once or twice a year	10.2	13.3	Leaning conservative	11.2	13.6
Several times month	10.3	9.9	Moderate	34.3	40.4
Once a month	2.5	5.9	Leaning liberal	9.5	10.7
2-3 times a month	7.6	8.6	Liberal	14.6	12.4
About weekly	7.1	4.5	Extremely Liberal	3.7	3.8
Weekly	22.4	17.1			
Several times a week	7.6	6.9			

attend church about weekly or weekly. The BRS and GSS compare favorably among very conservative respondents and liberal respondents. The BRS has a higher proportion of "conservative" respondents (21.6 percent versus14.6 percent) and slightly fewer self-identified moderates (34.3 percent versus 40.4 percent).

The analysis is conducted in two stages. First, we look at the expected predictors of gun empowerment within the population of gun owners. Specifically, we are interested in whether white males, those who have experienced economic distress, and those who are less religious are more empowered by their guns. We include an interaction between economic precarity and the race of a gun owner because economic distress may be felt by whites more severely than other groups. These analyses give us a clearer sense of *who* comprises America's gun culture. Second, we estimate models that examine how gun empowerment affects attitudes toward sources of gun violence, gun control policy, and when violence against the U.S. government is justifiable. These analyses show the effects of gun culture on the politics of guns.

The questions measuring gun empowerment were asked only of gun owners. Each respondent was asked the following: "Do you happen to have in your home or garage any of the following?: (a) a handgun/revolver for protection (yes or no), for recreation (yes or no), as a collector's item (yes or no); (b) a long gun for protection (yes or no), for recreation (yes or no), as a collector's item (yes or no); (c) an automatic/semi-automatic weapon gun for protection (yes or no), for recreation (yes or no), as a "collector's item" (yes or no)." The frequencies for each gun category are as follows: 467 respondents report owning a hand gun/revolver, 433 respondents report owning a long rifle, and 233 report owning an automatic/semi-automatic weapon. Less than 15 percent of gun owners claim 'collector's item' as a response. The weapon of choice for personal protection is the hand gun (67 percent); however, 44 percent of automatic/semi-automatic weapon owners report protection as a reason they have it. Long guns are used primarily for recreation (58 percent). There is also much overlap among categories—80 percent of long gun owners also own a hand gun/revolver, and 93 percent of those who own an automatic/semiautomatic weapon also own a handgun/revolver. In total, 577 respondents owned at least one type of gun listed.[3]

Symbolic Meaning: Gun Empowerment

The primary variable of interest in our analysis is the measure of symbolic meaning, which is an index that measures the symbolic attachment gun owners have to their firearms. The 577 respondents who report owning a handgun/revolver, long rifle, or automatic/semiautomatic weapon were asked their

3 There are 577 respondents who own a gun in the BRS IV. With listwise deletion, this subsample of the BRS IV reduces to 435. We employ multiple imputation models for all regression models in this article to recover the missing cases. We use Proc Mi Analyze (MCMC Algorithm with binary rounding) in SAS to complete this analysis.

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level of agreement with the following series of matrix question responses to "Owning a gun makes me feel: (a) safe; (b) responsible; (c) confident; (d) patriotic; (e) in control of my fate; (f) more valuable to my family; (g) more valuable to my community; (h) respected."[4] We conducted an exploratory factor analysis on these 8 items and find that they load together quite well (Cronbach's Alpha = .93). Moreover, there is not uniformity in the response. Figure 1 provides a histogram showing the distribution of gun empowerment among gun owners.

Symbolic Action: Gun Violence and Gun Policy

The BRS IV contains a group of questions asked of all respondents concerning the sources of gun violence in America and the respondent's attitudes about hypothetical or existing gun policies in America. Gun violence is measured with a six-item matrix question "For each item, please tell us how much, if at all, each of the following contributes to gun violence in the country." Each item has the following response categories: "a great deal," "not so much," and "not at all." The six items are: (1) the availability of gun; (2) the absence of God from our public schools and places; (3) irresponsible gun owners; (4) media violence, such as in movies and video games; (5) inadequate treatment of mentally ill people; (6) inadequate background checks on gun purchases. Each of these items is estimated using a multinomial logit model with a generalized logit link.[5]

The third dependent variable in this analysis is a set of items that measure attitudes toward gun policy. Respondents were asked whether they favored or opposed the following items: (1) a ban on semi-automatic weapons; (2) expanded gun safety programs; (3) putting armed security guards/police in more schools; (4) better mental health screening of gun buyers; (5) a ban on high-capacity ammunition clips that hold more than ten bullets; (6) more teachers and school officials having guns; (7) banning the possession of hand guns except by law enforcement; (8) laws that allow citizens to carry concealed guns. Each item is analyzed with logistic regression.

Finally, we examine the effects of gun empowerment on proclivity toward violence against the government and political activities. The question from the BRS IV is, "Do you think that it is ever justified for citizens to take violent action against the government or is it never justified?" It is analyzed with logistic regression.

Independent Variables

Hypotheses 1 through 3 outline our primary independent variables; they are sex, race, religiosity, and economic precarity. We include variables that indicate the sex (female = 1) and the race of the respondent (white = 1, nonwhite = 0). Next, we include two measures of religiosity. The first is how often the respondent attends religious service, measured with a nine-item index ranging from "never" to "several times per week." The second measure is "How religious do you consider yourself to be: not religious, slightly religious, moderately religious, and very religious." Finally, we include a measure of economic precarity, a term provided by Carlson (2015b) to signify anxiety created by the Great Recession. We asked respondents two questions about their perception of the economy. The first question is, "When it comes to the availability of good jobs in America, some say that America's best years are behind us, while others say our best years are yet to come. What do you think? (behind us, best yet to come)." The second question is 'Do you ever feel at risk of falling to a lower social class? Yes or No." Two additional questions were asked about the direct negative recession related experiences the respondent had in the previous five years. The first question is, "In the past five years have you or someone from your household lost their job because of the bad economy? Yes or No." The second question is, "In the last five years have you or someone you know faced home foreclosure? Yes or No?" These four items were recoded to binary variables (1, 0) where 1 represents a negative

4 The Likert response categories are: strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.

5 We initially estimated these models with cumulative logit models, but the proportional odds assumption was violated in most cases, therefore we switched to a more appropriate multinomial analysis.

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Table 2. Operationalization of Indices used in the Analysis

Economic precarity[a]

1. When it comes to the availability of good jobs in America, some say that America's best years are behind us, while others say our best years are yet to come. What do you think? (behind us, best yet to come)
2. Do you ever feel at risk of falling to a lower social class? (yes or no)
3. In the past five years have you or someone from your household lost their job because of the bad economy? (yes or no)
4. In the last five years have you or someone you know faced home foreclosure? (yes or no)

Alienation[b]

1. The economic system is working against me.
2. The rich get richer why the poor get poorer.
3. The political system is working against me.
   Cronbach's Alpha = .7

Gun empowerment[c]

1. Owning a gun makes me feel safe.
2. Owning a gun makes me feel responsible.
3. Owning a gun makes me feel confident.
4. Owning a gun makes me feel patriotic.
5. Owning a gun makes me feel in control of my fate.
6. Owning a gun makes me feel more valuable to my family.
7. Owning a gun makes me feel more valuable to my community.
8. Owning a gun makes me feel respected.
   Cronbach's Alpha = .93

[a]Precarity additive index range: 0-4.
[b]Strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.
[c]Strongly agree; agree; neutral; disagree; strongly disagree.
Source: Baylor Religion Survey IV

response (best years behind us, risk falling into lower social class, someone in household lost job, yes know someone facing foreclosure). These four items were summed to create a precarity index count, with a range from 0 to 4. The distribution of gun owners on the precarity index is a follows: 0 (13.5 percent), 1 (26.3 percent), 2 (31.4 percent), 3 (21.42 percent), and 4 (7.38 percent).[6]

In addition to our primary independent variables, we control for a variety of factors that may influence gun owners' attachment to their guns. We include an index to measure the extent to which respondents feel alienated from the system. We use the following three questions: "The economic system is working against me." "The rich get richer while the poor get poorer." "The political system is working against me." Respondents were given the following Likert response choices: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. We combine the three questions into an alienation index in which a high score indicates a high level of alienation (Cronbach's Alpha = .7). Table 2 provides a description of each question used to create the three indices used in this analysis.

The models control for a variety of demographic measures. We control for marital status. The hegemonic masculinity model indicates that married respondents with children should have stronger

6 For comparison, those respondents who report owning no guns have a precarity index distribution of 0 (17.3 percent), 1 (30.8 percent), 2 (28.5 percent), 3 (16.04 percent), and 4 (7.36 percent). Moreover, gunowners are statistically more likely to report 2 or more precarity events—47 percent of non-gun owners report 1 or fewer precarity events, compared to only 39.8 percent of gunowners.

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attachment to guns than non-married or childless respondents (Carlson 2015b; Stroud 2012). We use a system of binary variables to control for marital status. Married respondents are the suppressed category. Likewise, we also control for whether or not there is a child under 18 in the home (1 = yes, 0 = no). Age is measured in years. Since socioeconomic status is an important variable in adapting to economic change, we include measures of education and income. Education is measured as an ordinal system of highest grade completed (no high school, high school graduate, some college/vocational degree, college graduate, and postgraduate. Income is an ordinal scale ($10,000 or less, $10,001 - $20,000, $20,001 - $35,000, $35,001 - $50,000, $50,001 - $100,000, $100,001 - $150,000, $150,000 or more). We have a binary variable for rural residents based on their response to a size of place question (1 = live in rural area; 0 = someplace else).[7]

We control for political views, as conservatives show much greater masculine, pro-gun attitudes (Winter 2010). Political views are measured with a Likert response item: "How do you describe yourself politically? Extremely Conservative, Conservative, Leaning Conservative, Moderate, Leaning Liberal, Liberal, Extremely Liberal." A high value on this variable indicates a more liberal world view. We also control for a measure of general social trust: "How much can you trust people in general: A lot, some, a little, not at all."

We also control for whether or not the respondent has been threatened by a gun or shot at, because this may create a greater psychological need for the protection that the gun can provide.[8] The last control variable is a proxy measure of mental health. We use a Likert response question: "In general, how happy are you with your life as a whole these days? Would you say very happy, somewhat happy, somewhat unhappy, or very unhappy?" Table 2 presents a summary of how each variable is measured.

FINDINGS

Before turning our attention to the multivariate regression results, we first use these data to explore differences between gun owners and non-gun owners in our sample. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for all independent and dependent variables by gun ownership status. We conducted appropriate bivariate statistical tests to assess differences between the groups. Some of these results are expected. Gun owners, on average, are more likely to be white, male, married, older, and rural. On the other hand, gun owners report significantly higher incomes, and statistically insignificant differences in education. Gun owners attend church more often, and report greater levels of religiosity. Gun owners are politically more conservative, and report higher levels of alienation from society. Surprisingly, gun owners are not statistically more likely to report that they or a loved one had been threatened by a gun, and they also report similar levels of overall happiness. Finally, gun owners and non-gun owners report (statistically) the same levels of economic precarity.

The literature on gun owners suggests significant diversity (see Celinska 2007; Spitzer 2004). Table 4 shows a breakdown of gun owner characteristics by their level of gun empowerment.[9] Over half of gun owners who have low levels of gun empowerment are female, and a third are nonwhite. This group is politically moderate, and has low levels of worship attendance. Two patterns of gun ownership distinguish this group (Celinska 2007; Spitzer 2004). One segment of this group fits the "gun for defense" model; that is, females who feel safer having access to a handgun for protection. The second segment of this group, albeit smaller, is gun collectors. One in four low gun empowerment owners report collecting a wide range of guns. This level is significantly higher than in any of the other gun empowerment categories. The low-medium gun empowerment category is more likely to contain higher income and slightly more conservative gun owners. Neither low nor low-medium

7 The other response categories include small town or city, a suburb near a large city, and a large city.

8 This was a clear finding in Stroud's (2012) interviews with concealed weapons permit holders in Texas; just the fantasy of being accosted by superior force drove the narrative of why a concealed permit was necessary.

9 We divide gun empowerment into quartiles: low empowerment, low-medium, medium to high, and high empowerment.

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Table 3. Descriptive Statistics and Difference Tests for Gun Owners and Non-Gun Owners

	Non-Owners		*Owners*		
Variable	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*Mean*	*S.D.*	*p*
White	.620	.486	.773	.419	*
Female	.632	.482	.451	.498	*
Age	48.291	21.654	50.664	19.804	*
Education	5.029	1.645	4.969	1.529	
Income	4.059	1.768	4.310	1.588	*
Rural community	.078	.261	.231	.421	*
Children in HH	.706	.456	.743	.437	
Never Married	.235	.424	.138	.345	*
Divorced	.190	.392	.118	.323	*
Widowed	.089	.285	.078	.269	
Economic precarity	1.655	1.146	1.761	1.142	
Alienation index	8.310	1.910	8.740	1.916	*
Liberal political views	4.040	1.534	3.380	1.503	*
Trust	2.830	.709	2.794	.648	
Worship attendance	3.554	2.928	3.887	2.931	*
How religious?	2.676	1.060	2.845	1.026	*
Threatened w/gun	.364	.481	.389	.488	
How happy	3.180	.754	3.177	.790	

*$p < .05$ (two-tailed tests)

gun empowerment owners score high on economic precarity or alienation. We label this group the gun recreation subculture. Nearly two-thirds of gun owners in this group use rifles for recreation.

The medium-high gun empowerment group is primarily comprised of white men. They have high levels of economic precarity and alienation. Over 40 percent report that they or a loved one had been threatened by a gun in the past. This group is also politically conservative, and 74 percent of them have handguns for protection and 28 percent report having semi-automatic weapons for protection. What distinguishes this group from the high gun empowerment group is the latter has higher rates of economic precarity, degrees of alienation, and is very conservative in their political views. The high empowerment group is also most likely to report having semi-automatic weapons for protection. The other factor that distinguishes the high empowerment from medium-high empowerment is insurrectionist thinking. Nearly half of gun owners in the high empowerment group believe that violence against the government might be necessary. This rate is 40 percent greater than those who believe this way in the medium-high category. We consider the medium-high empowerment group to have qualities of the NRA gun conservatives (white, male, conservative) (see Melzer 2009; O'Neill 2007), and the high empowerment group to fit the most extreme of that group, the insurrectionists (Horwitz and Anderson 2009).

Who Feels Empowered by Guns?

While white males are more likely to own guns than women or nonwhites, our ordinary least squares analysis indicates that there is no direct difference between men and women, or white and nonwhite gun owners in their attachment to guns (see Table 5). This fails to support H1 and suggests that even though popular narratives about gun masculinity might inspire males to purchase guns they do not necessarily augment the way white males feel about their guns. Other social and cultural factors are at work. For instance, politically conservative gun owners feel more empowerment from their

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Table 4. America's Gun Cultures

Level of Gun Empowerment	*Demographic Profile*	*Gun Usage*	*Policy Attitudes*
Low	31% nonwhite; 51% female; lowest income group; youngest group; lowest economic precarity group; moderate politics; least religious group; 33% threatened w/gun.	57% have handgun for protection; 59% have long rifle for recreation; 7% have semi-automatic for protection.	74% oppose arming teachers; 40% oppose concealed carry; 37% oppose ban on high capacity clips; 37% oppose ban semi-automatic weapons; 24% violence against government might be necessary.
Low-medium	83% white; 52% female; highest rural group 27%; 84% have children in home; lean conservative politics; attend church the most; 31% threatened w/gun.	60% have handgun for protection; 66% have long rifle for recreation; 17% have semi-automatic for protection.	65% oppose arming teachers; 56% oppose bans on semi-automatic weapons; 46% oppose banning high capacity clips; 27% oppose concealed carry; 29% violence against government might be necessary.
Medium-high	82% white; 58% male; 73% have children in home; conservative politics; 47% threatened w/gun.	74% have handgun for protection; 43% have long rifle for recreation; 28% have semi-automatic for protection.	62% oppose bans on semi-automatic weapons; 54% oppose bans on high capacity clips; 50% oppose arming teachers; 17% oppose concealed carry; 30% violence against government might be necessary.
High	78% white; 65% male; 70% have children in home; 41% threatened w/gun; highest levels of economic precarity and social alienation; very conservative politics; low on religious participation.	76% have handgun for protection; 54% have long rifle for recreation; 38% have semi-automatic for protection.	77% oppose ban on semi-automatic weapons; 71% oppose bans on high capacity clips; 30% oppose arming teachers; 11% oppose concealed carry; 48% violence against government might be necessary.

firearms than liberals. Moreover, gun owners in rural residences have .1 standard deviations higher levels of empowerment. The only other demographic measure to have an effect on gun empowerment is education, and this effect is curvilinear.[10] Taking the partial second derivative of this equation, we find a positive relationship between education and gun empowerment until the top two categories of education, college degree and post-graduate degree. Among college graduates the slope is -1.4, and among those gun owners with a post-graduate degree, the slope is -2.6. Those gun owners with a BA degree or higher draw significantly less empowerment from their guns.

10 Initially the regression models showed a positive effect of education and church attendance on gun attachment among gun owners. Neither of these findings met with our understanding of the literature. We explored the data for possible non-linear relationships and found that both variables had curvilinear relationships to gun attachment among gun owners.

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Table 5. OLS Regression of Gun Empowerment on Economic Precarity and Controls Among Gun Owners

	b	*se*	*b*	*se*	*b*	*se*
Intercept	10.691	3.687**	13.648	3.778***	12.844	3.729***
White	1.382	.768	−2.635	1.402	−2.005	1.315
Female	−1.216	.638	−1.293	.636*	−1.294	.637*
Age	−.016	.015	−.015	.016	−.016	.015
Education	6.097	1.301***	6.055	1.302***	6.231	1.295***
Education SQ	−.625	.137***	−.623	.137***	−.639	.136***
Income	−.461	.248	−.446	.248	−.434	.248
Rural community	.834	.329*	.781	.329*	.765	.329*
Children in HH	1.502	.806	1.523	.804	1.519	.804
Never married	1.658	.981	1.912	.981	1.824	.979
Divorced	−.729	.983	−.171	.988	−.276	.985
Widowed	−1.498	1.139	−1.039	1.146	−1.145	1.144
Economic precarity	.054	.288	−1.642	.548**	−1.393	.514*
Alienation index	.328	.163*	.704	.316*	.354	.163*
Liberal political views	−1.219	.216***	−1.217	.217***	−1.182	.215***
Trust	.363	.488	.346	.487	.316	.487
Worship att.	1.634	.434***	1.685	.434***	1.728	.433***
Worship att. SQ	−.171	.053**	−.185	.053***	−.188	.053***
How religious?	−.991	.405*	−.927	.404*	−.941	.404*
Threatened w/gun	.911	.614	.875	.614	.911	.614
How happy	.086	.424	.165	.422	.144	.422
White by precarity			2.192	.633***	1.875	.585**
White by alienation			−.474	.366	na	na
R square	.171***		.187***		.184***	
$N = 577$						

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Our measure of economic precarity does not have a significant effect in this model, which is counter to H2. The measure of "how much the world is against me" does have a significant positive effect, suggesting that among gun owners, for each unit increase in the "world is against me index," gun empowerment increases by a modest .09 standard deviations. However, the effect of economic precarity becomes apparent when this variable is interacted with race. For nonwhite gun owners, economic precarity decreases gun empowerment (b = -1.39). For white gun owners, net of a variety of other statistical controls, including political views, the threat of economic insecurity increases their gun empowerment. Our findings support Carlson's (2015a, 2015b) qualitative study of Michigan gun owners. Specifically, whites appear to utilize the gun as a means to mitigate economic despair, and nonwhites who experience economic despair actually feel less empowered by their guns (see Figure 2).

We also tested for interactions by gender and find that economic precarity has the same effect for both males and females. This lack of interaction, however, is consistent with the role of gun violence in the hegemonic masculinity narrative (Smith and Smith 1995). While we expect women gun owners to have different views of guns, the male protector narrative may also be attractive to women in positions of precarity. In other words, female gun owners in economic despair also tend to view guns as their protector against an increasingly dangerous world, instead of dangerous instruments in and of themselves (Carlson 2015a, 2015b).

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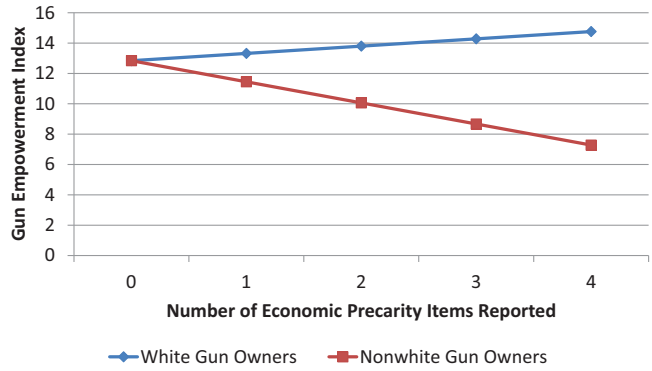

Figure 2. Effects of Economic Precarity on White and Nonwhite Gun Owners' Feelings of Gun Empowerment

Two measures of religiosity have significant effects, which both lend support for H3. Higher self-estimated religiosity decreases gun empowerment among gun owners. For each unit increase in the religiosity measure, gun empowerment decreases by .13 standard deviations. Church attendance has a curvilinear effect. The slope between church attendance and gun empowerment among gun owners is positive from no attendance to the category for attend once a month. Among those gun owners who attend more than once a month, however, the slope is negative. Among those who attend weekly, the slope is -1.1. Overall, high levels of religiosity decrease gun empowerment among gun owners suggesting that religious commitment offsets the need for meaning and identity through gun ownership.

Does Gun Empowerment Matter?

Gun owners differ significantly in their attitudes toward gun control and their beliefs about the sources of gun violence (see Table 6). Almost 90 percent of gun owners want expanded gun safety. About one third of gun owners believe that the availability of guns is a major source of gun violence, while another third do not see gun availability as contributing to gun violence. Gun owners are split on the wisdom of arming teachers and other school administrators, and nearly 4 in 10 would favor a ban on semi-automatic weapons, and 45 percent of gun owners favor a ban on high capacity ammunition clips.

We find that gun empowerment helps to explain much of the variation in the attitudes and beliefs of gun owners. Gun empowerment is statistically associated with strong opposition to bans on semi-automatic weapons, ammunition clips, and hand guns (see Table 6). Furthermore, the greater the degree of gun empowerment, the lower the probability that gun owners support more mental health screening for gun purchases. Greater empowerment also leads to stronger support for concealed weapons/carry permits and the belief that arming teachers/school administrators/school guards will protect students. These owners tend to view guns as a cure for gun violence rather than a cause, a position that is very consistent with the American monomyth narrative (Lawrence and Jewett 2002) and insurrectionist movement rhetoric (Horwitz and Anderson 2009)

Gun policy is an area which separates male and female gun owners. Female gun owners are more likely to favor bans on semi-automatic weapons, high capacity ammunition clips, greater mental health screening, and to oppose concealed weapons/carry permits and armed teachers in schools (Kleck et al. 2009; Tyler and Lavrakas 1983; Wolpert and Gimpel 1998). A very similar pattern emerges for older gun owners. We propose that women and older gun owners use the gun for personal protection, and do not see the utility in excessive firepower. Race has very few direct effects. One that is most interesting is that nonwhite gun owners are more likely to favor concealed weapons/carry permits than white owners.[11]

11 Felson and Pare (2010b) suggests that this may reflect an "honor culture" among nonwhites. We do not have data to make more affirmative statements about this conclusion.

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Table 6. Log Odds of Gun Owners Favoring the Following Gun Policies

	Ban Semi Automatic	*Armed Guards in School*	*Better Mental Health Programs*	*Ban High Capacity Clips*	*Teachers Have Guns*	*Ban Hand Guns*	*Allow Conceal Carry*
	b	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*
Intercept	−2.396*	.938	2.761*	−1.529	−.180	1.393	1.920
White	−.251	−.139	−.008	−.603*	.291	−.038	−1.074***
Female	1.568***	.014	.630*	1.203***	−.735***	−.118	−.858***
Age	.032***	−.001	.024***	.041***	−.013**	.026**	.000
Education	.018	−.178*	−.132	−.032	−.142	−.044	.146
Income	.132	−.050	.057	−.009	.001	−.210	−.046
Rural community	−.092	−.043	−.208	−.061	.213*	−.403**	−.051
Children in HH	−.486	.024	−.388	−.635*	−.318	.173	−.747*
Never married	−.279	−.321	.101	−.564	−.772*	−1.427*	−.873*
Divorced	.498	−.572	.547	.415	−.869**	.018	−.847*
Widowed	−.188	−.725*	−.161	.420	−.363	.114	−.511
Precarity	−.185	.103	−.161	−.273**	.240**	−.188	.023
Alienation index	−.048	.017	.039	.009	−.051	−.154	.174**
Politics	.504***	.027	.231*	.456***	−.229**	.253*	−.390***
Trust	.340*	−.159	−.025	.373*	−.144	−.181	−.004
Worship attendance	−.074	.014	−.101	−.060	.013	−.075	.045
How religious	.457**	.194	.396*	.493***	−.020	.040	−.424**
Threatened w/gun	−.171	−.038	.455	−.302	.183	−.357	.020
How happy	.035	.022	.211	.176	−.228	−.128	−.201
Gun attachment	−.069***	.044**	−.084***	−.078***	.074***	−.049*	.111***
Pseudo *R* square	.395	.180	.202	.421	.337	.252	.325
$N = 577$							

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

These results also inform previous findings in the literature on gun policy. Previous studies have found that education and income increase levels of support for gun control (Celinska 2007; Tyler and Lavrakas 1983). These past studies are based primarily on general population samples of owners and non-owners. This research tradition frames gun policy as one of owners versus non-owners (see Kleck, Gertz, and Bratton 2009). One common theme in this research is that education and income is positive correlated with support for gun control, and with holding negative impressions of gun owners. However, our results show that among gun owners, education and income have little impact on gun policy, despite significant variation on both measures within the subsample. While gun owners tend to be older, on average, in our subsample of gun owners older respondents are significantly more likely to support bans on hand guns, semi-automatic weapons, and high capacity clips, and oppose arming school teachers. Regarding religiosity and political orientation, liberal gun owners favor bans on semi-automatic weapons and high capacity clips, and do not support arming teachers or concealed weapons. Gun owners who report being more religious also have a very similar pattern. These respondents are not anti-gun, but anti-excessive violence and force. Those respondents on the conservative end of the political spectrum, however, are predictably anti-government regulation when it comes to guns. Gun owners have diverse opinions when it comes to gun policies, and there are a variety of factors that explain these diverse views.

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Table 7. Multinomial Logit Analysis: Gun Owner Attitudes about Sources of Gun Violence

	Availability of Guns	*Absence of God in Schools*	*Irresponsible Gun Owners*	*Media Violence*	*Inadequate Mental Health Screening*	*Inadequate Background Check*
	b	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*	*b*
			A Great Deal/Not So Much			
Intercept	−.909	−1.825	3.930***	−.390	.940	1.601
White	−.733**	−.727*	−.332	.005	.051	−.389
Female	.568*	−.053	.365	.986***	.846***	1.094***
Age	.028***	.008	.003	.018***	.008	.007
Education	.166*	−.193*	−.220**	−.055	−.009	−.205**
Income	.021	−.104	.094	−.111	−.066	.046
Rural community	−.038	.111	−.135	.020	−.254*	.041
Children in HH	−.271	−.313	−.981**	−.174	−.307	−1.394***
Never married	−.063	−.775	−.729	−.181	−.683*	−.815*
Divorced	.738*	−.668	−.001	−.263	.126	.873*
Widowed	.313	−.714	.670	−.043	.438	.740
Economic precarity	−.324**	−.068	−.200	.066	.229*	−.199*
Alienation index	.108	.123	−.015	−.111*	.006	.075
Liberal political views	.395***	−.403***	.155	−.154*	.063	.238**
Trust	−.045	.011	−.158	.140	.176	.268
Worship attendance	−.104*	.170**	−.054	.112*	.025	−.160***
How religious	.319*	.554***	.127	.000	−.276*	.274
Threatened w/gun?	−.350	.166	.276	.129	−.266	.109
How happy	.010	.192	.034	−.063	−.017	−.067
Gun empowerment	−.027	.061***	−.014	−.001	.018	−.008
			Not So Much/Not At All			
Intercept	−2.003	2.102	−2.067	3.535*	−1.776	−.312
White	−.038	−.332	−.117	−.001	1.001	.553
Female	−.384	.086	−.304	−.050	.488	.117
Age	−.007	−.006	.009	−.013	.002	−.003
Education	.146	−.033	−.235	−.061	.047	.009
Income	.032	−.052	−.061	−.157	−.176	−.076
Rural community	.204	.285*	−.109	−.105	−.315	.289
Children in HH	−.126	−.490	−.446	−.877	−.144	−1.171**
Never married	−.090	.245	.046	.320	−1.250	−.544
Divorced	.436	−.842	.653	−1.198	.497	.513
Widowed	−.048	−.110	1.301	−.588	−.271	.487
Economic precarity	−.169	−.272*	−.326	−.300	−.308	−.190
Alienation index	.171**	.097	.082	.032	.060	.172*
Liberal political views	−.030	.113	.256	.029	−.081	−.009
Trust	−.111	.122	.532	.008	−.341	.045
Worship attendance	−.132*	−.051	−.277**	.184*	−.132	−.248***
How religious	.393**	−.612***	1.004***	−.420	.237	.248
Threatened w/gun?	−.544*	.228	−.140	−.036	−.172	−.226

(*continued*)

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Table 7. Multinomial Logit Analysis: Gun Owner Attitudes about Sources of Gun Violence (continued)

	Not So Much/Not At All					
How happy	−.036	.152	−.408	−.297	.501	.013
Gun empowerment	.047**	−.007	.025	−.030	.019	−.006
Pseudo *R* Square	.264***	.528***	.165***	.223***	.165***	.221***
$N = 577$						

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

While gun empowerment is significantly related to attitudes about gun control, it is only partially related to how owners understand the sources of gun violence in the United States (see Table 7). Gun owners who are more empowered by the gun are less likely to see the availability of weapons as a problem, and more likely to see God's absence in public schools as a cause for gun violence. Gun empowerment has no relationship to beliefs about the role of media violence, mental health screening, or background checks on gun violence. Most gun owners lay some blame on irresponsible gun owners (74 percent report that irresponsible gun owners contribute "a great deal" to gun violence); and gun empowerment has no direct effect on blaming irresponsible gun owners.[12]

There are clear patterns of blame among gun owners when it comes to the availability of guns. Nonwhites, females, older and better educated gun owners are likely to see gun availability as being responsible "a great deal" for gun violence. White men, on the other hand, do not blame the gun. In terms of non-demographic measures, a lack of economic precarity, being politically liberal, and being more religious all have positive effects on seeing the availability of guns as being a major source of gun violence. Regarding gender, it is with the sources of gun violence that we see a significant separation between men and women gun owners. Women are more likely to blame media violence, lack of mental health screening, and inadequate background checks.

Finally, gun empowerment is significantly related to insurrectionism, or whether a gun owner believes that it is justifiable to take up arms against the government (see Table 8). Horwitz and Anderson (2009) argue that insurrectionist gun owners see gun violence against the government as the ultimate act of patriotism, protecting individual liberty against a tyrannical government. Because of the close association between insurrectionists, patriot movements, and white nationalists beliefs (see Blee and Creaspar 2010), we tested an interaction between race and gun empowerment. This interaction shows that the positive relationship between gun empowerment and violence against the U.S. government is restricted to white gun owners (see Figure 3). For each unit increase in gun empowerment among white gun owners, the odds of responding that violence against the U.S. government may be justified increase by 9.1 percent. Among nonwhite gun owners, there is no relationship between gun empowerment and violence against the U.S. government.

Females, liberals, and very religious gun owners do not support violence against the government. Education, however, has a peculiar curvilinear relationship among gun owners. There is a positive relationship between education and violence against the government for all categories of education lower than a college degree. College graduates and those with a post-graduate degree do not favor violence against the U.S. government.

These findings indicate that a portion of gun owners who feel empowered by the gun form a distinct interest group—one that opposes gun control and feels that social problems and perhaps even personal troubles might be best solved by guns. For this group, the gun and violence are the first

12 The estimated model for irresponsible gun owners does not fit the data well enough to claim any statistical relationships between the predictors and outcome variables.

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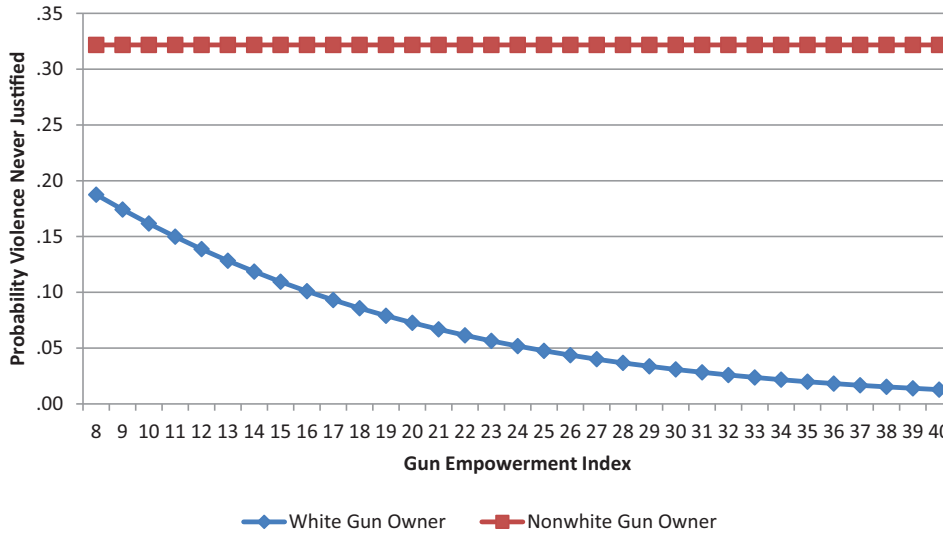
.35
.30
.25
.20
.15
.10
.05
.00
Probability Violence Never Justified
8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40
Gun Empowerment Index
White Gun Owner
Nonwhite Gun Owner

Figure 3. Effects of Gun Empowerment on Violence against the Government for White and Nonwhite Gun Owners

Table 8. Log Odds of Gun Owners Opposing Violence Against the Government

P(y = Violence against Federal Government is Never Justified)	*b*	*SE*
Intercept	4.931	1.357***
White	−.402	.264*
Female	.513	.221
Age	−.009	.005
Education	1.444	.482**
Education SQ	−.128	.049*
Income	.007	.081
Rural community	.157	.111
Children in HH	.021	.262
Never married	.301	.312
Divorced	.158	.319
Widowed	−.385	.403
Economic precarity	−.291	.093**
Alienation index	−.023	.051
Liberal political views	.209	.074***
Worship attendance	.046	.046
How religious	.398	.132**
Threatened w/gun?	−.045	.195
How happy	.101	.135
Gun empowerment	−.038	.014**
Pseudo *R* square	.209***	
N = 577		

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

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order tools in the defense of individual freedom. In sum, gun empowerment matters because it is directly related to gun policy preferences.

DISCUSSION

The idea that the United States contains a distinct "gun culture" is embraced by researchers, the media, gun control advocates, and the NRA alike. With this article, we attempt to more precisely define this culture and propose that it is best measured by how gun owners feel about their weapons, specifically the extent to which an owner feels emotionally and morally empowered by his or her gun. The sources of these feelings are complex, based in popular narratives and myths about guns as well as the economic circumstances of gun owners and their lack of connection to other sources of existential meaning.

Innovative discussions concerning the effects and importance of "culture" have delved into the psychological and cognitive processes through which moral symbols and concepts subconsciously shape behavior. Vaisey's (2009) "dual-process model" of culture and Jonathan Haidt's (2012) "moral foundations" theory provide new and insightful ways to understand the deep embeddedness of moral schemas in human cognition. They highlight the fact that cultural symbols and narratives play a guiding role in how humans perceive and react to their world. Still, Swidler (2008) argues that

> The question of how culture shapes action can't be answered by figuring out better models of how it operates in the heads of individuals, however interesting (and however difficult) that might be; instead, we need better analysis of the structures that determine how cultural meanings will be organized, and when and where particular sets of meaning will be brought to bear on experience" (p. 617).

Our analysis answers Swidler's call by directly examining how social circumstances help determine the cultural meaning of guns for individuals. In turn, we demonstrate the effect of these meanings on political opinion and strategies of action.

Our findings support a key argument offered by Swidler (1986) in "Culture in Action." We found that economic distress enhances the extent to which white men, specifically, come to rely on the semiotic power of a cultural symbol. As Swidler (1986:278) hypothesizes, "doctrine, symbol, and ritual directly shape action" in "unsettled" time periods. During times of distress, cultural tools become more than post-hoc rationalizations of individual preferences and become guiding ideologies. This appears to be the case for white male gun owners who, when facing unsettling economic times, utilize guns as a foundational source of power and identity.

In discussing the economic frustrations of rural Americans, President Obama famously said that "it's not surprising then that they get bitter, and they cling to guns or religion . . ." (Fowler 2011). Our findings support Obama's idea that guns provide an emotional and moral source of meaning especially for white Americans experiencing economic distress. In addition, Obama's use of the conjunction "or" was prescient because we find that religiosity and gun empowerment are negatively related. This suggests that religious communities offer alternative symbols and identities that offset the need for guns as a source of self-esteem and moral standing. While American religions often support the morality of gun ownership (see Young 1989), religious activity seems to devalue the sacred importance of guns. Perhaps participation in a Judeo-Christian community reinforces the message that the faithful need to love and see the good in others (Wuthnow 1991:50). While more research is needed to investigate this claim, it still appears that there are a finite number of cultural symbols that can stimulate an individual's emotional devotion.

Because symbolic power was found to influence basic perceptions of the social world, our findings support Vaisey's dual-process model, which asserts the primary importance of moral culture in motivating human action. We find that simply owning a gun does not predict an individual will express anti-gun control opinions. Rather, it is an owner's empowerment from the gun that best explains his

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or her policy attitudes. This emotional and moral connection explains variation *within* the population of gun owners. Our data show that the symbol of the gun as morally and existentially empowering is what activates pro-gun policy and anti-government sentiment.

CONCLUSION

Previous research on the symbolic empowerment guns provide has focused on two scenarios. One, is closely linked to the model of the "hero." Weakened or inept social institutions require individuals to accept personal responsibility for the protection of themselves and their communities. A second explanation emerges from the "insurrectionists" argument. Guns empower people to confront a tyrannical government (Berlet and Lyons 2000; Celinska 2007; Horwitz and Anderson 2009; Jiobou and Curry 2001). We find a third explanation—guns provide moral purpose to white males who have lost, or fear losing, their economic footing. Our findings also indicate that Americans' attachment to guns is not explained by religious or political cultures. While church attendance and political conservativism predict gun empowerment, the effects of religiosity can be countervailing and the significance of political identity is too broad. Instead, only a subset of religious conservatives find emotional solace in guns, for reasons neither religious nor partisan. Specifically, less religious white men in economic distress find comfort in guns as a means to reestablish a sense of individual power and moral certitude in the face of changing times.

The times appear to be shifting away from the ideals of America's gun culture. Fewer individuals hunt or live in rural areas in which they can hunt, more Americans support stricter gun control, and white males (the prototypical American gun owner) represent a decreasing proportion of the population (Melzer 2009). Still, gun laws have not been strengthened and gun narratives remain ubiquitous; we expect this is the case because a vocal and passionate minority of gun owners continues to feel emotionally and morally dependent on guns. As Melzer (2009) puts it, "Gun Crusaders' deep commitment to gun rights and frontier masculinity speaks to the NRA's current and future ability to remain a potent political force. It is an impressive feat considering all the trends working against them" (p. 254). It is not just money from gun manufacturers shaping gun legislation; it is the cultural solidarity and commitment of a subgroup of Americans who root their identity, morality, and patriotism in gun ownership. This is gun culture in action.

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